

Guest Commentary



Vote "NO" on Question 1

As a parent of four children, I try my best to lead by example. Choices sometimes may not be popular but one needs to stand up for what he or she believes and at times to call upon others to join in. Voting "NO" on Question 1 is not a vote against the Town or the school system; it is a vote against how we have chosen to manage.

In the past 18 months we have been called upon and voted to pay nearly \$12MM toward four projects that were cast as pressing, urgent or dire and here we are being asked for more tax money. Belmont does not have a revenue problem, we have a management problem. Managing our expenses ~~as part of the discussion~~ has not been considered as part of the overall approach toward being fiscally responsible.

We owe it to all the taxpayers of Belmont to have a balanced approach to consider both the expense and revenue side of managing our Town's operating needs. Let's not forget that we have in excess of \$206MM in capital projects that will require your tax dollars.

Voting "NO" on Question 1 will be the responsible choice and will open the discourse ~~of~~ to a balanced approach toward crafting a multi-year plan that impacts both the revenue and expense side of our budget.

This issue is too important to stand on the sidelines and ~~to~~ not stand up. Not voicing my concern is not an option (*kids take note*). I call upon you to join me in voting "NO" on Question 1.

Raffi Manjikian, Treasurer – Vote NO on Ballot Question 1 Committee
12 Pearl Street
BHS Class of '78
Town Meeting Member Precint-3
Vice Chair of the Warrant Committee

Letter to the editor

The initial School Department budget for FY2016 shows a gap of \$1.7 million between school expenses and current estimates of revenue available to the schools. This is an important issue and one that must be solved. But of the possible solutions, a mega override of \$4.5 million (Ballot Question 1) is the worst possible alternative.

- Together with the tax increases already baked in of 2 ½% plus the CPA override, this override will mean an increase of \$927 for the average homeowner. This is a significant burden for those on fixed incomes and will accelerate the outflow of long time residents.
- There is widespread agreement that the high school needs renovation. Paying the Town's share (estimated @\$70 million) will require average homeowners to pay an additional \$1072 per year in taxes. Passing that on top of the mega override increase will be very, very challenging.
- The \$4.5 million is much greater than the FY2016 need. As most of us have personally experienced, the incentive to budget carefully and set priorities is reduced when "free" money is available.
- In 2014, Superintendent Kingston described teacher compensation – the "step and lane" system as "unsustainable," and hoped to modify them. Nevertheless, a perfect storm in 2014 (retiring superintendent, high turnover on school committee, and a more aggressive state teacher's union), resulted in a 2014 collective bargaining agreement which retained the step and lane system, included a cost of living increase, and increased the number of personal days – increasing compensation costs by approximately 5.2%. The mega override will "ratify" this expensive collective bargaining agreement reached with the teachers in 2014 and virtually guarantee similar increases in 2017 and 2020.
- When the School Department sees a budget shortfall, it works hard on cost control. But stopping the purchase of school supplies cannot yield meaningful savings. With five superintendents in ten years, no one has taken on the big structural cost issues such as managing special education costs; the high fringe benefit costs of part time employees; and examining the tradeoffs involved in hiring more credentialed teachers with higher salaries. With the "extra" millions of the mega override, the incentives to do this hard work are much reduced.
- Belmont is a community where the American dream still works. Among Massachusetts towns with top public high schools –e.g. Weston, Wellesley, Dover, Wayland, Concord-Carlyle, etc. Belmont is the only town where moderately priced rental housing, good public transportation [well, except in February], and good public services allows regular working people to give their children an education that is second to none. If we pass a mega override this year, we'll need another in 2017 and 2020. Many agree that bonding for a new high school, police station and DPW building is critical. But the combination will push up taxes by an average of over 6% a year, doubling in 12 years. That is a scenario for driving diversity out of Belmont – the middle class

Comment [LA1]: Waiting for confirmation

and those on fixed incomes - out of Belmont, leaving us a Weston (*although with smaller lots*).
That's not what we should aspire to be.

Dear Editor,

I will vote no on April 7th. As a resident since 1986, this is a first for me — in the past I have always been a reliable vote in favor of override ballot questions. But this spring I believe that the better way forward is to reject the override, agree on new solutions to deal with the urgent fiscal year 2016 budget issues, and then come back to the voters with a true long term plan.

I appreciate the work of the Financial Task Force and its full report. The 193 page report will be a valuable resource in the years ahead. My decision to vote no on April 7th is influenced greatly by the analysis in the FTF report.

For instance, the Capital Group (pp. 145-162) highlights five major projects and estimates that they will require annual debt service costs exceeding \$10 million per year by 2022 — more than twice the amount of the proposed override.

The Revenue Opportunities Group (pp. 105-144) describes both one-time sources of revenue through property sales as well as ongoing income through competitive pricing of recreation facility rentals and services.

The School Compensation Modeling Report (pp. 24-44) provides a path to achieve a compensation plan that is competitive and fiscally predictable and stable. This important work is yet to be done, and without it, the success or failure of any one operating override question will not get us any closer to a viable long-term budget.

These are three important pieces of a much-needed long-term financial plan — and there are others as well. The \$4.5 million override is a short-term patch that fails as a long-term solution. I will vote to reject the April 7th override proposal, and I'll be ready to work with everyone this spring to find a better solution.

Jim Gammill
19 Dorset Road